

Regine, explain something to me. When David says to you, and maybe Henry didn't have to say it, and I don't know if your father said it as well, but you're really Jewish. You haven't lost being Jewish. What does that mean? He didn't simply mean you are still the daughter of Sabine and Arie?

No, that I hadn't lost whatever Jewishness I had in me, even if I had become a Catholic. I had kept that. Like, you know, we would talk traditions and feasts and things we remembered from our childhood. And, as he said, he had talked to a lot-- this happened in Israel that people became Jewish for the sake of marrying.

And he said, it never came from within from the heart. You could feel they had adopted that, but they are not really Jewish. But I can't deny it, you are. So that was the biggest deal for me because it did hurt to think that he thought I had lost my Jewishness because I became a Catholic. Which even in the minds of many Catholics is the same. So hey, hey, wait a minute now. How can you be Jewish, a nun, and Catholic? That doesn't work together. So you're not a Jew anymore. Sorry, I still am.

Right.

But people find that very difficult to understand. That's not the first time you hear that, right?

No, no, no. It's not the first time.

OK.

No, not at all.

Yeah. So, and I wouldn't want to have lost that.

Yes.

Because, you know, I might have been hiding it for many, many years and not daring reveal to anyone. But I do pressure it. It's precious to me. I wouldn't want to lose that heritage, you know? And I think it's something to be proud of.

But within the context of the order of which you're a part, do people understand it? Did you pursue the discussion of that with other nuns as much as you did with your brothers? No?

No.

Does that bother you?

For some, no matter how you do it, they just cannot grasp it. I don't know what it is, but it is a real difficult concept to grasp. I notice.

You notice that?

Yeah.

Even more difficult in some ways than for your brothers to grasp it?

For some Catholics, this just doesn't go together. Personally, I think they're not versed enough in their own upbringing as Catholics, because this is something which I never experienced with Marie or with Elise. And probably, that was one of the biggest cornerstones a plus for me that she had that broad mind view and understanding of the religion. That Catholicism was only an achievement, the continuation of the Jewishness, and not to do away of it. Which I can say, I can count on one hand, people who understand it so well as she did.

And probably, wouldn't have been so easy for me. Or maybe not so willing to convert if I hadn't seen that. Do you know what I'm saying?

Yes. Yes, I do. That they appreciated where you came from and didn't want you to cut yourself off from that.

No. And appreciated that they wouldn't be there if it hadn't been for the Jews. That there is no such thing Christ without the Jews.

Jews, right.

And she said, you should be proud you are from the race of Christ himself. And he never denied his Jewishness--

Right.

--which is true. But I do know that there aren't many who can understand that. And I don't know why that is. That's why I think it's more ignorance probably.

But this must not be comfortable for you.

Not always.

Yes.

No. And I've experienced in different countries with our own sisters. Like in England, I've encountered some misunderstanding and some confusion there, which they don't really know what we talk about. I told you I have experienced it in a very bad way in Israel itself. And that came from Franciscan sisters, you know?

And that was more than just ignorance, I think. There was a streak of anti-Semitism in there, which was very, very difficult to take. And when it goes like that, I don't reveal who I am because it gives me a chance to see the whole picture.

The minute I would have said, I'm Jewish, they would have shut up. And things would have been said behind my back without me hearing them. And I wanted to know the whole scenario and the whole of this. So I never said anything, but I listened to everything.

And that I did find really hard in an institute of biblical studies to find an attitude like that. That's when I told you I went to the co-director, who was a Sister of Zion. And their whole mission and idea is this bringing together of Jews and Christians. And she said she would act on it. They probably never had a chance to have heard it from an outside angle like me in the picture.

And what did you hear?

A lot of negative connotations about the Jews against the Arabs. That is Israel. I mean, everything like with the wave of the hand, like, you know, well, what do you expect from the Jews? I know that I had really to bite hard not to say, what are you here for? If you don't like it, you can leave the country. You don't belong here. But I didn't. I just waited to find my time to talk about it and make sure that people knew about it.

But then you would find the opposite too. Within the same year, a Jesuit would come and give us three months of biblical classes. He was absolutely outstanding. And he made up for any negative that I have had before.

And I'm sure that he saw the tell on my face. Each time he made the connection between Christ and the Jewish people I would, of course, be beaming, so he knew who I was before I even told him. I said, how did you guess? It wasn't difficult.

So as much as your fear was shown to the Nazis, your joy of this was shown?

Yeah.

Now, today, you've been wearing a chai, meaning life.

Yeah.

Which is a Hebrew letter.

I know.

Letters. Do you wear this often? And do people say what is this?

Well, some people question it. I say what it means. Teenagers don't understand it. They think it's the pi.

Uh-huh.

The mathematical symbol. And I let it go with that innocent. I wear my Star of David in school too.

You do?

Yeah. Depends on the mood I'm in. I very rarely wear a cross.

Now, that's interesting. And why?

I think I just need-- I don't know. I trying to explain it to myself. That I want to be part of that, you know? I'm Jewish, so my symbol is, first and for all--

Jewish.

--Jewish. But if I have to wear a cross, I wear a cross. I have crosses. But I don't wear them. I feel like they're there without me having to wear them.

Yeah.

Do you know--

Yes, you're nun.

--no, but you know the meaning? No, not just that. The cross is like something hard that you have to accept in your life. Well, God takes care of that. I have many crosses. So I don't have to wear it.

But there is something else. I mean, you have taken on the Catholic religion and your identity with it?

And I not want to identify it with being Jewish.

Jewish, right.

So it has a meaning. It took me a long time to do that because, as I told you before, in many places where I lived, I would have been afraid to show that openly. So it's mainly since I came to America that I have felt free enough to do that.

Now, I'm sure if I should go back to Belgium this summer, I've been really thinking twice when and where I wear it. I do not want to be attacked in the street. Do you know what I'm saying?

Yes.

See, that still is there, unfortunately.

Right.

60 years later, we still have to think about that.

And you feel there's a more a greater freedom and a greater acceptance in this country of your dual identity?

Yeah.

In the church as well?

I think so. There is ignorance everywhere here too.

Yes.

But there is a greater acceptance and a greater freedom to be what you are. Do you know what I'm saying?

Yes.

Yeah, that I felt very much here.

Now, did you choose to come to the United States after 20 years in Africa, or were you sent here?

I couldn't go back to Africa for health reasons.

Uh-huh.

And I didn't want to stay in the Europe. So they offered me to come. And I accepted. And I've been very happy ever since I've been here.

Yes. And you became an American citizen?

Yeah. There was not much point to be here and citizen from Belgium, which I only did for convenience sake. Apart from the family that saved me, I have no personal attachment to Belgium. It's been a time of suffering and misery. So you know, there wasn't much advantage to just coming Belgium. So I decided I might as well.

Now, you kept in very close touch with Marie and Elise and the whole family and Paul and the kids. Right? So when you had vacations, I assume--

I still go there.

--you still go there. And when you were in Africa, you came back?

I came back to Marie and to Elise. And when they were alive, that's where I spent my vacation.

So both of them have passed?

Yeah. And Paul too.

And Paul has passed?

Yeah, Paul is the first one who went. But then there are the daughters, so that's where I hang out.

Out, yes.

I stay with our sisters now and again too. But I sure make sure that I am with them.

With them.

And spend time with them.

And they're staying in the same general area--

Yes, yeah.

--in Belgium?

And they're like, you know, I am really everything to them.

Yes.

Yeah.

And you were like an aunt?

Hm-mm.

Yes?

The aunt. Yeah. We took care of them, you know?

Yes.

Which is only vice versa. Of course, they don't maybe remember a lot of it because they were just getting to be born when I came around.

Yeah, yeah.

You know what I'm saying?

Right. But you've been there all their lives.

But I did-- I've been there all their lives. And before I entered, I really did take care of them and it helped a lot.

So you've been able to renegotiate with your family, except for Isi. Isi is the--

Isi--

--most difficult one.

--is still very difficult, yeah. Now, with David, I re-established a real good relationship with him, his wife, and his children. He's always been very open with his own. He's always told them what happened to me. And who I became.

Now, with Henry, there was definitely no problem because he lived part of my life anyway.

Yes, yes.

And he would have definitely converted if--

If he had stayed.

--if he had stayed on. He doesn't-- you know, in the beginning, he wouldn't say it, but lately he's not been denying that. And there is still some belief in him.

Yeah.

And I can say to Henry easily, well, all I can offer you is my prayers because I really am upset about the whole thing. And he said, well, you would definitely need to do that. Now, David had no time for that. Didn't want to hear the word prayer. You're wasting your time.

Religion is a waste.

And each time you pray, things only go worse. I said, OK.

So David is still not religious at all?

No.

Right?

David passed away, huh?

Yes, recently.

Last year. Yeah.

Yeah.

September.

Now, is Henry religious in any way as a Jew?

No.

Nothing?

Nothing.

Nothing, which is sort of typical in Israel.

Typical in Israel. Typical in kibbutz.

Yes.

And he's still in the kibbutz, right?

And when he reached a certain age, he didn't decide to leave. He had gotten comfortable enough in Israel so he decided to stay?

No, he would have liked to leave. He had considered it very seriously. But his wife, Miriam, is a born kibbutz girl. And she was terrified of the situation, the insecurity, and all that. So they didn't leave. And I'd stay he regrets that.

Uh-huh.

Not that it might have made-- given the actual circumstances, I don't know wherever there's anything better. But still, life has been a real hard in the kibbutz. And their main problem is that they have not planned or foreseen anything for retirement. There's no pension. So they've worked for 60 years. And they find themselves with nothing to their name.

Right, because they're in the kibbutz. Yeah.

And notice that he has four kids. There's only one who still is in the kibbutz because her husband is there. But the others have left the kibbutz and want to create their own life, which can't blame them for.

Right. And you're close with those kids as well, your brother's children?

Yes, see our problem with that, we would be very close. No way of communicating. With the younger ones, we can get to English.

Yes.

With his wife, she only speaks Hebrew. And I don't speak Hebrew, which I regret very bitterly. And if I was anywhere closer to a big city, I think I would still have time to learn some Hebrew just for the sake of communicating.

Right. And Henry maintained the relationship with the Alardo family after his time, yes? So he kept going back to them.

Still. Yeah. He was there last summer again.

Really?

Spent 10, 12 days there. Yes, he keeps very good contact with them.

But he must have been separated for a long time before he was able on his own to contact them?

Yeah. And then he's invited them over there. And one of the girls has been over there with her daughter. He's been to their baptisms. He's been to the communion. He's taken his wife there. He's taken his children there. So he's keeping a real close contact with them.

So you both have double families?

That's right.

Right.

For what is left, unfortunately.

Yes, yeah.

Hm-mm. Now, Regine--

Now, with Isi, it is a totally different ballgame. First of all, he denied me totally. Wiped me off his life. Wouldn't let his

children know that he had a sister. She was dead.

I think it is the year I went the first time. And I was going to meet with my father. His son was supposed to come out. And when he heard I was coming, he stopped the trip because he did not want his son to meet me.

But the son has been going a lot to be with his cousins. So David put the law down. And told him, look, you do what you want. But we hide nothing from our children. And one way or another, Daniel is bound to find out from his own cousins that there is an aunt and what she is. Because we don't make mysteries of it. She is what she is. And we tell them that.

So you do what you want, but he's going to find out. And indeed, Daniel, we have met. I met him in Israel. He lives there now. And is it a reverse of a medal or whatever, he has become a total of Hasidic in a non-Jewish family that he was brought up. I mean, non-believers.

Not religious. Yes.

Totally. The dress, the pious, everything. But he did make an effort to find me when I was with Henry--

Uh-huh.

--three, four years ago. And he came to visit. And I think he wanted more like to hear a little for his own information. Because he wrote first. He wrote several times. Didn't start off too well because he told me, now, whatever you tell me, I still believe what my father told me.

So I wrote back. And I said, well, let's not waste our time. If you already tell me you're going to believe whatever he told you, what's the point of me telling you anything? So that's OK with me. I can live with that.

But he changed then over the years. He still wanted to hear. So he came to see me. And I spent like an afternoon with him. And he told me how he converted through some rabbi in New York that he had met. And he's totally gone into it, to the despair of his parents.

I bet.

Total despair.

And Isi and his wife have how many children?

Daniel and a daughter, whom I've never seen.

Right.

So that one he has kept away from me.

Altogether.

And I've made several attempts over the years to try to get a bit closer. And see whether we could just-- you know, because he's in Brussels.

Right.

I go to Brussels. And I don't go to see him. We've tried in the beginning. We tried several times. And it's always been very hard and just too difficult. And it wasn't worth me getting all upset about it.

And on other occasions, they insisted we'll try again. And maybe it'll work. And we set up once even to go together,



Simon, his wife, and me. I say, OK, I'll do one more effort just to please you all, but you're coming with me.

And after 10 minutes, we all left. It was just-- it started right off. I mean, you know, there was just not even a minute of relaxing, talking about--

So Simon is actually OK with this now?

Yeah, very much so. Simon has been very supportive all the way through I don't know how, but he was. Always try to say, well, she's still your sister. She's family. You can just drop it like that.

So the situation-- maybe if his wife wasn't in the picture, and she has a very strong hold on him, she would never let him alone with any member of the family. That it might have been easier just brothers and sisters together, but that doesn't happen. So it's on a minimal basis. We exchange Rosh Hashanah cards and Easter cards.

Really?

And that's new. But that works.

He sends an Easter card to you? You're kidding me.

And I write back.

So is he and David and Henry close? Or is he not close --

They have had a lot of strains between them too.

Because Isi sounds like he's very troubled [INAUDIBLE].

Yeah, but you know what, it could also be what he went through with his life.

Yes.

That he's never been himself.

Right.

I think it has a lot to do with that. He's been marked. And seen the most horrible things, which no one knows what.

Right. So tell me something, another thing, this is the first--

I've told you a lot.

Right. Right. This is the first time you've given an interview. And from what you've said, this may be one of the first times you've really sort of told as much of the story as these hours could contain. Why now? Why haven't you talked before you think?

I suppose, first of all, you need to have an audience that you can totally trust. And that you know that there's not going to be any prejudice, be it on the Jewish side or be it on the Catholic side. And the audience was there.

Now, maybe I feel more secure within myself about the two. But I think it has a lot of to do with to whom you tell it. Do you know what I'm saying?

Yes.

Now, the one sister I told you that we were very, very close and who passed away is the one to whom I told everything. There has been one or two others in the order. But, again, it is the way they are receptive to it, which makes it easy for me to talk. But if they're not, I cut short. Or I close up.

Now, I've told a lot to Helen.

Right.

Because I needed someone--

To speak to.

--to speak to. So she knows a lot. And she's been very, very encouraging and wanting me to write, and wanting me to do it. And really wanting it. That she thinks it's just the most-- she has no prejudices, neither on one side, nor the other, which is great.

Yes.

You know?

Yes.

But I couldn't do it with every daughter of Mary and Joseph. There's just no way.

And you've never talked with your students? You've taught for so many years.

No.

And when you came to this country a student didn't say, you don't sound American? You have a slight accent.

Yeah, but that's OK with them.

That's all right.

I am from another country.

Country.

Right?

Right.

That's fine, but it has nothing to do with Jewish or Catholic.

Right.

Right?

Right.

And when I came, I had another kind of difficult experience because on the faculty, we had a Jewish teacher. And she could not accept me not at all. So there was a big problem there. Sometimes she would even walk out if I walked in the faculty room. And if I wore my Star, she would just go ballistic, you know?

And it was strange because she would invite my friend, the nun, to a bar mitzvah or anything like that, but she wouldn't invite me. Probably because I betrayed. You know, that's the way people look at it. Right?

Yeah, right.

It's a betrayal.

Yes.

Which I have learned to live with, because not everyone can understand. And that's the way it is here.

You know, it's interesting to me that, as I watch you over these hours that we've spent together, you've been in positions that it seems to me could make somebody bitter.

Hm-mm.

Both on the Catholic side and on the Jewish side.

Right. Right. And I've had it all.

And yet, you don't seem to be bitter or anguished. It's painful, but something else seems to be much more prominent in you.

That is true. That is so true.

And do you think it's your faith?

Probably. That I'm able to accept that on both sides, you know?

Yes.

Like, for Isi, for example, I will say I had it more against my father than I had it against him. Because this is the way I reasoned it, he suffered the worst of the whole family. He's just been back two days later. What did I expect? It's normal for him to say you betrayed me. You do to me what I've just come out from having suffered.

And so that helped to understand where he came from. And so don't hold it against him. Now, over the years, I thought this is long enough. And then not to be able to broaden your mind after all that, you know? And not even tell your own children that you have a sister. Even if you want to say, she's real, though, she's strange. This is the way she-- fine. Go for that, but totally deny the existence. That was an extreme again.

Right.

And then I suppose a lot has to do that I'm able to grasp it's not an easy thing to understand. And so I can't hold it against them really. I could have gone bitter. I could have gone totally imbalanced.

But I think faith has a lot to do with it. And I received a lot too, you know? As I said in the end of my story, I feel I'm rich because I have the inheritance of both.

Right.

And for me, they amalgamate and come together very well. So I really have the best of the two worlds.

And you spent a life teaching and giving back--

Yeah.

--to many students.

And that, although, I don't like to talk too much about me, but I have done a lot with my life really when I think of it. You know? I've taught in the poorest countries in Africa. And I've done a lot of communal work with them and teach them how to do it.

And since I've been here, I've done a lot. I've had a whole group of, we call it in-school Christian service, where-- it's time to stop?

No, go ahead, continue.

Where we help the poor and the homeless and the down and out. And preparing meals and collecting food and making Thanksgiving baskets and go and deliver it. Yeah, I had a group of like 180. There were some Thanksgivings that we fed over 240 families with the collection of what the teenagers collected in school under my guidance. And I think those are great achievements, you know? He's waiting.

Yes, I think we have to stop the tape for right now.